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Connecting Drama and Writing: seizing the moment to write

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Abstract

This paper outlines a year long research project which examined the relationship between drama and writing. It details both its method of enquiry and theoretical foundations and shares the emerging findings. The purpose of the research was to understand the nature of the support that process drama offers to children as writers and to identify any features of writing which regularly surfaced in children's drama related writing. The research team, comprising two lecturers and three primary school teachers adopted a qualitative approach and a range of research methods, including: video stimulated recall, observation of the case study children's involvement, analysis of their writing and focus group interviews. Process drama sessions based on picture fiction were planned and two approaches trialled in the pilot study to connect drama and writing. The first, termed 'genre specific' involved working towards a chosen text form at a designated moment during process drama, the second involved more spontaneously 'seizing the moment' to write. The main study focused on the latter approach and examined the elements of drama that impacted upon and supported children's writing. The connecting threads identified included: the presence of tension, emotional engagement and incubation, and a strong sense of perspective and purpose gained in part through role adoption. When these threads were in evidence, the writing produced captured and held the interest and attention of the reader and showed a clear sense of authorial stance. In addition, it was frequently full of inventive details and the choice of language used tended to be powerful and emotive, often demonstrating a marked degree of empathy. The team observed that in addition to a palpable increase in motivation and commitment, an enhanced sense of focus, flow and ease in writing was noticeable when the children wrote in-role during process drama. Furthermore, the children often chose to revisit writing begun in the context of drama, to reshape and develop it further. The paper demonstrates that drama has much to contribute to the composing life of the primary classroom and discusses the pedagogical implications of this research.

Introduction

The close relationship between educational drama and the development of language and literacy has long been recognised (Britton, 1970; Heathcote, 1980; Neelands, 1993; Wagner, 1994). Yet in England, despite the inclusion of drama in the primary National Curriculum for English (DfES, 1999), the potential of this relationship has not been fully realised. It could be argued that the dominant culture of accountability and prescription recently in evidence has marginalised the contribution of drama and the arts in primary education. Writing in particular has been perceived instrumentally; its apparent purpose reduced to demonstrating linguistic competence and knowledge retention (Frater, 2000; Packwood and Messenheimer, 2003). Arguably, this has produced technically competent, though disengaged young writers who find little purpose in writing and write for their teachers and the curriculum, but not for themselves (Grainger *et al.*, 2002; OFSTED, 2003). It has also compromised practitioners' pedagogical knowledge (English *et al.*, 2001) and is likely to have limited their artistic involvement in teaching and learning. Recently however, calls for more creative and innovative approaches to the primary curriculum in England have been voiced (DfES, 2003), and many teachers have begun to imaginatively interpret

the demands of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) (NLS), often turning to drama to help them motivate and support their young writers (Bearne *et al.*, 2004; Barrs and Cork, 2001; Grainger *et al.*, 2005).

In seeking to understand more fully the relationship between drama and writing, the research team of teachers and lecturers, whose enquiry is reported here, were conscious both of the need to resist 'the exploitation of drama/theatre to achieve other ends' (McCaslin, 1984, p.287), and the pressure to respond pragmatically to the reality of national tests and targets. The teachers wanted to develop their own practice and persuade their school senior management that drama should be properly timetabled and valued. As a consequence they were determined to find ways to document and demonstrate its support for young writers. Together, the team sought to understand the nature of the support that drama offers children as writers and to identify the connecting threads between these symbolic modes that facilitate effective writing. The team also sought to closely examine the qualitative features of writing which regularly surfaced when children wrote in role. This article, whilst acknowledging the small scale nature of the enquiry, seeks to share the tentative insights and enhanced understanding about the interplay between drama and writing which developed.

Drama and writing: a reciprocal relationship?

Relatively few empirical studies have investigated the relationship between drama and writing; those that have tend to have focused on the role drama plays in motivating writers and improving writing. This research sought to add to this field of enquiry and to examine more closely the writing produced in the context of drama in the primary phase. Working with kindergarteners, Pelligrini (1984) demonstrated that dramatic play was highly related to total word writing fluency; although this was only shown through single dictated words. In a quasi-experimental study, Moore and Caldwell (1990, 1993) found that drama was a more effective precursor to writing than traditional planning and discussion and others too have observed and recorded similar findings (e.g. Wooland, 1993; Wagner, 1998; Booth and Neelands, 1998). McNaughton's (1997) research suggests that primary aged learners who engage in drama prior to writing, write more effectively and at greater length, using a richer vocabulary that contains more emotive and expressive insights. Her work also reveals that children's writing during drama reflects a better understanding of the issues and possesses a clearer sense of voice, which she defines as 'writing-in-role where the writer appears able to 'get under the skin' of the character and identify with him / her on an affective as well as cognitive level' (McNaughton, 1997, p. 79). The work of Neelands *et al.*, (1993) indicates that drama positively enhances secondary pupils' attitudes to writing and that such pupils recognise the mutually reinforcing relationship between drama and writing and their empathetic potential. Also working with secondary aged learners, Wagner (1986) has shown that role play can support persuasive writing, whilst Goalen (1996) has indicated it can enrich historical writing.

Drawing upon five small scale studies of process drama and writing, Crumpler and Schneider (2002) also found that children's writing composed in drama had more depth and detail. In all the studies in this cross case analysis, the children's understanding of the narrative was enriched by the multiple interpretations and transactions of the experience. These researchers propose that drama becomes a

conduit which facilitates a flow of imagination between process and product. It could be argued however that drama has the potential to be more transformative than this metaphor implies, since multiple perspectives are adopted and a variety of tools are available for kinaesthetically, orally and physically generating ideas. It is clear that through drama children compose multi-modally and are able to shape their ideas in action prior to committing these to paper or screen (Nicholson, 2000; Baldwin, 2004). More recently, Fleming *et al.*, (2004) undertook a quantitative study also indicating the positive effect of drama on primary learners' achievements in writing and other core subjects.

Work in the field of language and literacy has additionally shown that when drama is integrated pedagogically into the teaching of reading, writing, speaking and listening, the quality of related writing is enhanced, particularly when it is written in-role (Barrs and Cork, 2001; Safford *et al.*, 2004; Grainger, 2004). Research undertaken for the Primary National Strategy has also revealed that boys' attitudes and attainment in writing can be positively affected if drama is integrated into the English curriculum (Bearne *et al.*, 2004). The research team in the study reported in this paper wanted to examine the relationship between these two processes more closely, with a view to increasing their knowledge and understanding and responding to the current agenda demanding excellence and enjoyment (DfES, 2003). All the teachers and lecturers involved had experienced the motivating power of drama and witnessed its ability to enhance children's commitment in writing. This research sought to examine this interplay further, exploring the nature of the links between drama and writing and identifying any qualitative features of writing which regularly surfaced in children's drama related compositions.

The research context

Initiated in part by the teachers' desires and concerns, this project was unusual in that it departed from more common forms of research imposed upon professionals in the classroom; it developed organically through close collaboration and joint interpretation of the data. The three teachers, who were all undertaking a Masters degree at the time, taught in different schools in primary education in South East England; two taught 10-11 year olds, one taught 6-7 year olds. They participated with two university partners in a reflective contract (Schon, 1983) over a period of a year. Set within an interpretative-constructivist tradition, the research team adopted a qualitative approach and responded to the challenge of investigating the relationship between drama and writing through a naturalistic collaborative inquiry. The team met regularly to watch and analyse video material of drama sessions, to read and review the case study children's writing and to discuss the evolving issues, collaboratively sharing their perspectives (Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser, 2002). Throughout the pilot and the main study, they worked to honour 'the intuitive and emergent process that informs artistic meaning-making' (Taylor, 1996, p.2) and to identify the substantive and critical elements connecting drama and writing and the features of children's writing which were influenced by these.

Process drama, which was employed in this research, is arguably situated within a social-constructivist view of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986) and offers learners the chance to participate through creating shared fictitious worlds. It proceeds without a script, employs elements of both spontaneous play and theatre, and involves

the teacher weaving an artistic experience together and building a work in the process. In such drama both the teacher and the children engage in active make-believe, adopt roles and interact together to materialise ‘temporary worlds’ (O’Neill, 1995) which are fictional in nature. The process drama sessions developed for this research were jointly planned by the team based upon carefully selected high quality picture fiction books; the texts were chosen for their polysemic nature (Lewis, 2001), their potent visuals and their tendency to leave gaps for the reader to inhabit (Iser, 1978). They operated as effective pre-texts (O’Neill, 1995) and ‘catalysts’ (Crumpler, 2005) for the process drama work, and a range of drama conventions were employed to explore the ideas, issues and themes in the narratives. Whilst a lesson plan with learning intentions existed on each occasion, the teachers tried to respond to the interests of the children and let the drama venture into the unknown. The pilot study, undertaken over four months, enabled the children to become accustomed to the use of the video recorder and to their teacher making field notes; it also enabled the team to become better acquainted with the research tools selected and to identify an appropriate teaching approach for the main study. Following a summary of the pilot study, the design of the main research is described.

The pilot study: exploring approaches to connect drama and writing

During the pilot study, the teacher-researchers worked as participant observers in their classrooms and trialled two teaching approaches connecting drama and writing. In the first, the teachers focussed on a specific genre of writing and worked towards eliciting this form in the context of process drama. In the second, they planned process drama sessions and during these intuitively selected moments in which to write, allowing the children to choose their own form and purpose. The research team termed the first approach ‘genre specific’ and the second ‘seize the moment’. During the pilot, the teachers undertook four sessions (approximately one to one and a half hour long) with each approach. Although the difference between these approaches is not the main focus of this paper, their distinctive qualities are examined to reveal the trajectory of the main research.

The ‘genre specific’ approach

In the ‘genre specific’ approach, the teachers worked to align different drama conventions to particular forms of writing in order to ensure that the drama offered opportunities for oral rehearsal of the desired text type. Each drama was planned with a genre in mind and the teachers, working in line with what they felt was expected of them by the NLS (DfEE, 1998), undertook mini-writing lessons during the sessions to remind the children of the features of the text type prior to writing. The team found that this instructional period, however brief, appeared to interrupt the flow of the imagined experience and often dispersed the dramatic tension created and that the sessions often closed after the production of the written text, creating a system of one-way traffic. By requiring writing at a pre-planned point in the drama and leading the children towards this, the researchers noticed that the anticipated reciprocity between drama and writing was reduced. It was clear that the ‘genre specific’ approach palpably influenced the direction and shape of the drama work, which, from the evidence collected (in the form of planning documents, videos, observations and field notes), became more teacher-led and writing goal-oriented. The teachers’ explicit role shift from fellow-artist and collaborator, to literacy teacher and instructor appeared to diminish the children’s volition and independence as writers and meaning makers. As

a consequence, the purpose of their writing was compromised; it appeared to become 'quasi-curriculum' writing, writing to demonstrate textual competence, albeit composed in an imaginative context. When asked to comment on this writing, the children often referred to the inclusion or otherwise of the explicated writing objectives, rarely mentioning the content or meaning of their work or making connections to the drama which had triggered it.

The 'seize the moment' approach

In contrast, when the teachers remained open to 'seize the moment/s' to write during process drama, and allowed themselves to follow the learners' interests rather than a prescribed writing agenda, the drama not the writing took precedence. The forms of writing that were chosen by the learners included: maps, diagrams, diaries, notes, newspaper columns and letters. These often became a vital and connected part of the imagined experience and were more spontaneously and rapidly produced. In these sessions, the relationship between drama and writing was less explicitly framed than in the 'genre specific' approach; the teachers negotiated their way forwards and writing arose naturally in response to the situations encountered. The teachers expressed the view that they felt more involved in the issues of the drama and thus the related writing, working as they were inside the fictional frame, not outside it. They often wrote during these dramas which were shaped by the themes and questions being investigated, not by a predetermined and imposed text type from the domain of literacy.

In both approaches, the drama appeared to motivate the young writers and operated as an effective prompt, contextualising the act of composing. Yet when the case study children's work was analysed, it was clear that the 'genre specific' approach produced much less effective writing. Although this writing was often structurally sound and included several of the required linguistic features of the genre, it frequently lacked a sense of perspective, a clear authorial intention and/or a sense of voice. In this research, the concept of voice is recognised 'like a fingerprint to reveal identity' Andrews (1989, p.21), and is seen to represent 'the uniqueness of the individual writer, who draws on their own experience, knowledge, attitudes and engagement' (Grainger *et al.*, 2005, p.196). In the 'genre specific' approach the children, whilst perhaps more than usually motivated to write, did not appear to be fully engaged in the writing, they may have been 'playing the game called writing' (Grainger *et al.*, 2003), conforming to what they perceived was expected of them. The instructional focus and the linearity sought between the drama and the writing seemed to reduce their involvement and thus the scope and potential of their writing. From the outset the teachers had voiced the view that they expected the 'genre specific' approach to produce better writing, mainly because it combined making use of the motivating power of drama and attention to NLS set writing objectives (DfEE, 1998). However, the pilot study revealed unequivocally that 'seize the moment' drama and writing was not only more engaging for both the children and their teacher, but it also enabled more effective compositions to be produced.

Whilst the writing produced in 'seize the moment' drama and writing, included attention to both form and feature, these elements did not drive the writing, rather the substantive content and purpose of the communication appeared to be afforded more significance which made the writing more interesting. In addition, more relevant details were included, a clearer point of view was established and the choice of

language, whilst frequently appropriate in both approaches, was more adventurous and inventive in 'seize the moment' writing. The children appeared to write with a greater sense of agency and urgency in 'seize the moment writing' when they chose their form, content and point of view. Appreciating this freedom, they settled more quickly to the business of putting pen to paper and their writing had a real sense of purpose in the imaginary world created. It is possible that this approach increased the children's ownership and control over the compositional process; their writing was an integral part of the dramatic experience and often fed immediately back into it. Such autonomy, it has been suggested (Jeffrey and Woods, 1997, 2003), can positively engender creative responses and there was some evidence of this when comparing the two sets of writing.

In essence, the pilot study indicated that when the act of writing is reified as a somewhat separate and apparently more serious activity, as it was in the 'genre specific' approach, then as Crumpler (2005, p. 359) asserts, 'the imaginative energy created... is diluted'. As a consequence the writing produced was 'competent but uninspired' as one teacher described it. In contrast, the writing generated from seizing the moment more effectively held the interest and attention of the readers. It could be argued that these two approaches reflect the shifts in curriculum focus in recent years, in which, as Neelands (2000) acknowledges, the 'curriculum as planned' - in response to prescribed requirements - has dominated over the conception of the 'curriculum as lived/experienced' (p.54). Through exploring both conceptions in the context of this project on drama and writing, the teacher-researchers came to recognise the satisfactions and advantages of adopting a more responsive, experiential conception of the curriculum, in which writing was allowed to emerge naturally in the context of process drama and flexibility not rigidity held sway. It was for these reasons that the main study employed the 'seize the moment' approach to drama and writing.

Design of the main research study

The main research project was undertaken across two terms and drew on data from eight drama sessions in each classroom; these lasted between one and one and a half hours. The three teachers adopted the flexible working frame of 'seize the moment' intuitively selecting moments to write. They gave the learners free choice in terms of form, perspective, audience and purpose and sought to ensure that the writing was an embedded feature of the drama work. In contrast to the quantitative approach adopted by Fleming *et al.* (2004), this study adopted a qualitative approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This called for reflection on action (Schon, 1983), reconstructions of practice and detailed observation of the case study children's involvement in the drama and analysis of their related writing.

A research plan was designed in order to describe and interpret the data, with the teacher-researchers in the role of participant observers (Schwandt, 1994). In order to capture the complex interplay between drama and writing, video-stimulated review (VSR) or dialogic-view viewing as it has been called, was used to stimulate reflection and critical conversations about the teachers' pedagogy and practice and the children's learning. VSR is a powerful tool for educational research and reflection on learning (Walker, 2002; Zellermayer and Ronn, 1999) and in this project it helped make visible the moments chosen and the case study children's involvement. The

videos also helped the team capture some of the energy and electricity evident in the drama sessions and relate the artistic-aesthetic encounters to the writing produced.

Case study children were identified in each class from the outset of the research: three boys and three girls were selected on the basis of their achievements in writing. Each gender trio comprised one experienced/able writer, one average writer and one less experienced/able writer, as assessed by the teacher on the basis of the national tests and teacher assessments. English was the first language of all the case study children. The children were observed in an open-ended way (Jones and Somekh, 2005), the teachers noted as many details as possible in their field notes including observations of the children's roles and their involvement in the eight sessions. Their written work was copied for analysis and in addition the teacher-researchers brought the remainder of their classes' writing samples to the data analysis sessions, highlighting and sharing noticeable or surprising pieces composed by other learners.

The case study children's writing was analysed using both the current English Assessment Criteria for writing (QCA, 2003) and D'Arcy's (1999) interpretive frame. The former (QCA, 2003), explicates the criteria for quality writing in terms of three overarching categories: text structure and organisation, composition and effect and sentence structure and punctuation. The latter (D'Arcy, 1999), focuses more on the content and meaning of the communication and highlights the processes of reader engagement and appreciation. This suggests that teachers should first make an interpretive response as real readers and only then consider the writer's achievements, seeking to identify ways in which the writer's construction of the text and their use of techniques enabled the prior act of reader engagement. These two assessment tools contrast markedly and in using both the team sought to acknowledge the communicative intent of individual writers, as well as the text content and the use and effect of both linguistic features and text construction. The team recognised no absolute criteria or list of written elements could be applied given the complex situated nature of writing, the diversity generated and the different audience and purposes employed.; the quality and effectiveness of each piece was also considered in relation to the context of each imagined experience.

The team met regularly across the year, read field notes, engaged in VSR and questioned each others' thick descriptions. They worked inductively (if one accepts the belief that one can be truly inductive), by examining the video footage, the teachers' commentaries and the children's writing in order to notice what emergent categories connecting drama and writing were apparent in the data. As the research developed, through both the pilot and the main study, certain overarching categories were identified as connecting features; these were then used as observational prompts, although the team tried to remain open to new insights (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). They sought to bring all their perspectives to bear on the videoed drama, the case study children's involvement and the writing generated, and employed the iterative process of categorical analysis to analyse the main research data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The combination of approaches employed in this study aimed to 'ground' and 'support' theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and enabled the emerging themes and interpretations to be validated through this discursive and collaborative process. At the close of the project, the case study children took part in focus group discussions about writing and drama in class and

considered the connecting threads which had arisen from the analysis. These ‘member checks’ (Patton, 1990) helped to build the trustworthiness of the findings.

Through the ongoing process of examination, re-examination, reflection and discussion, the team identified the existence of three threads which appeared to connect drama and writing and foster effective compositions. These were the presence of tension, emotional engagement and incubation and a strong sense of stance and purpose gained in part through role adoption. In drama sessions where these features were present, the team noticed an increase in motivation and commitment, enhanced ease and concentration whilst composing and the existence of high quality writing. These threads overlap and interface, but for the purpose of this paper are presented separately and are illuminated through vignettes from the data. The examples also demonstrate some of the qualitative features of writing which were frequently evident in drama related compositions. These encompassed a clear sense of focus and empathy, powerful language choices and the inclusion of details, as well as a convincing authorial stance and an often emotively engaging voice. The writing produced in these contexts both captured and maintained the interest of the readers. In the written extracts all spelling has been corrected for ease of reading and all names have been changed for ethical reasons.

Tension

The teachers observed that the presence of tension frequently marked the moments that they successfully seized for writing. It is widely accepted that tension is a critical feature of drama (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995; Fleming, 2003; Bolton, 1988; Kitson, 1993), and in this study it was manifestly evident in the drama work which prompted powerful writing. The tension noticed and examined was often initially triggered by particular picture books which evoked puzzlement, conflict or ambiguity, but tension was also created by the teachers’ use of voice and the deployment of speculative questions, it was also generated by the children in spontaneously unfolding process drama sessions. The ‘writerly’ (Barthes, 1967) literature chosen, effectively prompted active engagement and left spaces for children to explore; *The Watertower* by Gary Crew (1994) for example, prompted an immediate air of apprehension. The tale begins with a visual of the mysterious watertower and describes how it casts a long dark shadow across the valley; hinting at previous events and possible premonitions. In one class, the teacher, enriching the text with additional ideas, pondered aloud why the water tower stood apparently unused, why children were warned away and how the fence around it had come to be broken. His questions, along with the openness of the text, created a tense sense of the unknown, encouraging the class to identify their own questions as they improvised and engaged in ‘possibility thinking’ together (Craft, 2000, 2001). This sense of uncertainty appeared to resonate through the drama, generating considerable imaginative energy and a wealth of opportunities to seize the moment and write.

When Bubba, a young boy is left alone inside the water tank, the 10-11 year olds in one class spontaneously created plaintive cries for help and sinister creaking, dripping and howling sounds. The cacophony of noises emanating around the room heightened the tension and the teacher perceptively seized the moment for writing. Coded letters, poetry, news reports, first and third person narrative accounts were all produced, symbolic expressions of the children’s engagement in the drama. Rowan, a 10 year

old disaffected writer took what his teacher described as a major step forward; independently selecting his form, he settled quickly using the sounds he had voiced and heard to create a threatening and uneasy atmosphere. Imaginatively he inhabited the moment, describing it evocatively and repeating the word 'hello' as well as reducing the size of the letters, just as the sound in the classroom had gradually faded.

Hello, hello, hello...Who's there? The water sucked and gurgled beneath Bubba's feet, was it wanting to drag him down, tempt him in? What was in there? The wind whistled down the pipes, whirring past his ears, and echoing across the void, what was it trying to say? Was it warning him? The algae swirled in the darkness, down in the depths it seemed to writhe and twist driven by a force not its own. The ladder disappeared beneath him, its base trapped in the shadows which stretched on into the darkness.

Hello, hello, hello...Who's there? Bubba, tense and nervous gripped the metal rungs tightly, his fear rose like vomit in his throat threatening his sanity. He screamed.

Rowan

His teacher's field notes record that Rowan needed much less help than usual with this writing. Previous work has also shown that drama prompts increased independence, decreasing the need for adult support during writing (Bearne *et al.*, 2004). Rowan used a wider than usual range of ideas and vocabulary in this work; this was also evident in other examples when tension surfaced and scenarios packed with possibilities overflowed into children's writing. On viewing the video, his teacher pointed to him saying 'Look, see how involved he is - he was like that when he was writing- absolutely focused'. It is possible that having taken part in freeze frames, role play and small group improvisations earlier in the drama, when Rowan came to create the atmosphere in the tank, in sounds and written text, he may have been in 'a state of flow'. Csikszentmihalyi describes this state as 'the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement ... we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next' (2002, p.179). Perhaps, attracted by the tension of the unknown, Rowan became so involved in this world making play that he was partly subsumed by the mysterious situation, so that when he came to write his sense of self consciousness as an apparently average and frequently disinterested young writer was displaced. He moved into this writing with unaccustomed alacrity and in this state of full immersion or flow, may have felt the meanings of words and ideas 'more strongly and deeply' (Laevers, 2000, p.24) making his writing unusually effective. Motivation and concentration was a common feature in 'seize the moment' writing'; one teacher even noted the children 'seem to plunge into it almost without realising they are writing'.

Later in the same session, the class were confronted with a close up of Bubba's shocked face on the interactive whiteboard as he sees something or someone unknown; no words accompany this startling visual in the book. The video footage shows the immediacy of the children's reaction; some recoiled, others leant quickly forward, visibly engaged, yet clearly confused. The emotional disturbance of this image created further tension; their shocked silence contrasting markedly with the earlier multiplicity of voices. In interpreting this moment for his fellow researchers their teacher observed that he too had 'felt uncertain, unsettled', 'I was wondering what on earth he does see, you're never told -you never know, but you want to and I thought maybe we could decide by writing.' So after voicing Bubba's thoughts in an interior monologue, the chance to write was seized again. In the work produced, the children's deep engagement in the process of imaginative possibilisation remained in

evidence. Bubba's predicament, imbued with tension and uncertainty, appeared to encourage personal involvement prompting speculation and alternative insights. Some children sought closure and a release of the tension through their writing (Grainger, 2003) whilst others, like Parmjot (aged 11), writing in role as Bubba, chose to retain a sense of ambiguity.

*Anxious
Frightened
My heart was pounding
My head was frozen
My hands shook
I was thinking how am I going to get out?
What if I slip and drown?
What if...?
What if the stories are true?*

*There in front of me was ...a monster? Spike? Both?
A heart wrenching something.
My heart ached. I knew it was Spike, but surely it couldn't be.
It just couldn't be.
Its eyes told me everything and nothing
Red, bulging, mysterious.
A warning.
A still warning.
It was still.
I was still.
The world was still.*

Parmjot

Her intensely imagined work, somewhat poetic in nature, reflects the iconic and enactive mode (Bruner, 1966) in which the class were working. An able writer, Parmjot appears to be playing her way forwards here, developing and selecting ideas as they emerge, yet achieving a considerable degree of coherence. This protean-like process in some ways mirrored the drama in which she was playfully and multi-modally engaging, orally voicing possibilities, thoughts and feelings in a focused and thoughtful manner. In examining the serious play of writing, Gurevitch (2000) distinguishes between disciplinary seriousness, taking on the responsibilities of an adult expert and poetic seriousness, revealed from the point of view of the child whose play has been revealed. He describes writing as originating from moments of broken play and this appeared to be exemplified in 'seize the moment' drama and writing, when a combination of tension and flow developed the children's creative capacity to handle words, ideas and feelings. The tension appeared to fuel the dual process of imaginative thinking, establishing multiple questions in their minds (Cremin, 2004) to which the children responded emotionally, socially, physically and cognitively both in drama and in their writing. Furthermore, it could be argued that as well as increasing their creative energy, the tension experienced prompted their full involvement, inducing a state of flow which contributed to their evident ease in writing and the marked ideational fluency which was observed (Wagner, 1998).

Engagement and incubation

The depth of the children's engagement was a related feature which appeared to create an effective connection between drama and writing and contribute to the children's writing. The videos provided clear evidence of the often animated nature of the children's involvement in the issues; as Polyani (1967, p.100) suggests it is only by dwelling in themes that meaning can be understood. Their deep engagement in the drama appeared to be sustained through the actual act of writing, which perhaps intensified their concentration levels and increased their commitment. It was also noted that in their writing journals, undertaken elsewhere in the curriculum, many of the case study children chose to return to the themes examined in the drama sessions and tried out alternative perspectives and voices, revisiting earlier insights. The analysis of this writing suggests that the interlude between taking part in a drama and later related writing often served to enrich the later compositions. The incubation of ideas is a recognised part of creative endeavour (Wallas, 1926; Craft, 2001), but is not always provided for in the time-pressured performance culture prevalent in many primary classrooms. Drama however provided support for incubation; ideas were percolated through the extended imagined experience and were developed further when the drama was revisited in writing.

An example which tracks one child's journey through a drama session and her later writing may help to exemplify this argument about engagement and incubation. Morgan was selected by her teacher as an average 10 year old writer. In seeking to examine memory and age, the teachers planned a drama session using the picture book *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox (1987). In this story young Wilfred befriends Miss Nancy who has lost her memory. The class moved between imagined and personal/social roles as they employed conventions to create life histories for elderly characters, making connections to their own friends and relatives. At one point they opened metaphorical doors on the past and were invited to return to a particular place or time in their own or another's life. Morgan, clearly visible on the video, sat on the floor oblivious of her peers engrossed in an animated conversation; she was pointing, smiling and gesturing. Arguably operating as a full player on Neeland's (2000) scale of participation, she appeared to be physically and psychically engaged. Morgan's grandmother had died recently and the postcard to her teacher written immediately afterwards made it clear the imaginary meeting had been with her.

Dear Miss,

I've met my gran, I have not seen her for a few months, she's happy, she's got no pain any more and she can even run. She doesn't have her battery operated car any more. She asked me to get the photos out and sit down. The ground was hard and cold, but gran sat down beside me, (she can now because her back doesn't hurt) and told me about her new world. She thinks it's great. She showed me pictures of my dad and his sisters when they were little. I gave her a really big hug. Morgan

Morgan

Later in the drama she demonstrated this deep involvement again when on the hot seat as Miss Nancy. In role she spoke tentatively and thoughtfully, reminiscing in an absorbed and wistful manner, however her replies connected only loosely to some of the questions; she appeared to be musing out-loud and expressed a fondness for an imagined grandchild. Afterwards one of the children commented "it was like you were Miss Nancy - we could hear you thinking". Oscillating between engaging,

reflecting and connecting, Morgan stood both within and outside herself in this drama. As Edmiston (2003) notes the world of drama is always “a ‘doubled’ reality because we experience it happening in both imagined and everyday space-times simultaneously” (p.223). The teacher and the class interacted in both the ‘what if’ imaginary world frame and the ‘what is’ everyday world frame and through her writing it was clear that the social and cultural meanings made in the one space frame, contributed to the meanings made in the other. Morgan wrote her postcard in a state of aesthetic engagement (Bundy, 2003) and heightened awareness, which probably contributed to the empathetic nature of her writing. At the close of the session she explained with evident emotion how real the drama experience had felt and how she had touched her grandmother’s fleece. Later that week, in writing journal time, Morgan chose to return to this master thought (Wolheim, 1973) and drafted a poem, an extract of which shows that the dramatic encounter was still reverberating.

*The storm outside flashes white,
Meeting you again
Your hands like warm fire*

*The hard floor is cold and rough,
It’s not the same you say
Without you, I cannot be strong*

*The time has come, you have to go,
I scream, cry, shout and bellow
But what you feel is pale and pure.*

Morgan

The drama and the writing opportunities seized both within the dramatic frame and outside it, appeared to provide reflective spaces in which Morgan could make connections and consider her enforced separation from her gran. It is possible her imaginative involvement energised the processes of identification and transformation (Henry, 1999), and that the extended period of percolation allowed her thoughts and ideas to be internalised and reflected upon, both consciously and unconsciously. The two pieces of writing highlight the integration of her head and heart in the drama, for as Wolf *et al.* (1997) observe, ‘rather than separate intellect from affect, drama like life, weaves the two together’ (p.496). Her feelings invoked by this artistic experience, were voiced tentatively at first and then with more force as she explored her emotions and simultaneously stretched her voice. The following week, influenced again by this ‘primary generator’ (Sharples, 1999) Morgan composed another related poem.

*In my world I can
smell the smoky perfume
of her old curlers*

*In my world I can
see my gran’s red fleece
and me*

*In my world I can
hear my gran’s husky voice*

very near

*In my world I can
feel my gran's old chair
squeaking still*

*In my world I can
taste the roast dinner
on her table*

*My visit is over
I can go
My gran can still visit me though.*

Morgan

Leaning here on John Cotton's poem 'Through that Door' (Fanthorpe *et al.*, 1985) studied weeks before, Morgan creates a distance between herself and the imagined experience as she works towards accepting her gran's death. Significantly she leaves the door ajar in her final line. As a result of engaging fully in a drama experience, Morgan and many of the other case study children in the research chose to revisit powerfully experienced themes, adapting and often enriching their initial written texts through the processes of affective engagement, percolation and incubation.

Role perspective and purpose

The research findings indicate that the adoption of multiple role perspectives, a critical feature of process drama, also contributes to the quality of writing and is another thread connecting drama and writing. Writing in role from a particular perspective during process drama, seemed to provide the learners with an extended opportunity to examine and develop that stance as they reflected upon the events of the fiction. The stance and context also gave their writing increased purpose. Inspired by the book *The Lonely Whale* by David Bennett (1991) the 6-7 year olds took up roles as sailors and were shipwrecked and rescued by the whale. After they had built shelters and scavenged for food, they found the whale beached and were divided as to whether to help the creature. Their captain (TIR) blamed the whale for their misfortune but many disagreed "We owe him everything, he saved our lives", "You're not being fair" and "It's your fault we've been shipwrecked anyway". In this heated confrontation, the children's instinctive thoughts, feelings and views were voiced; this laid the foundation for the unfolding drama. Some of the assembled sailors clasped their hands over their mouths, whilst others shared worried glances and muttered ominously. Significantly, a few began to walk away from the scene, absolving themselves of responsibility perhaps and leaving the whale to die. With no obvious compromise or solution in sight, the teacher decided to capitalise on the children's involvement and the tension generated, commenting 'I wanted to try and capture all their different views' and she seized the moment to write.

The class settled quickly, producing messages for bottles, posters requesting help and persuasive notes to other sailors. The majority wrote with focused intent, many even remained standing as pencils urgently raced across paper and resolutions were sought. The situation had provided both an immediate purpose and an 'intrinsic need' to write

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.118). The case study children's writing, though brief, flowed with relative ease in contrast to their usual composing which their teacher reported tended to be committed to paper with intense labour and much erasing. Annalise and Nathan (6 year olds) are respectively an experienced and an inexperienced writer; both chose to write from an insider's perspective.

Dear anybody! HELP ME!

Please come to the huge island. This whale is beached and the captain and his crew just won't help me, and I can't do it myself. We've got nothing on this island except dried fruit, salty fish (I nearly choked on mine it was so salty) and hardly anything else! I am so sad, he was my best friend and he will die if he doesn't get in the water soon, and he is our only transport to get home.

Sam

Annalise

To someone

Please come and help I really need some help.

Please get these horrible people out of my way.

I need some help, my friend is stuck

Nathan

Annalise's plea for help reflects the sense of panic and tension experienced in the classroom, she recognises that as a solitary sailor she cannot save the whale, although she still affiliates herself to the rest of the crew using the pronoun 'our' to emphasise this connection. She is clearly thinking inside the imaginary situation and her description proffers rich details outlining the difficult circumstances in which the sailors found themselves. In both the drama and in her writing, Annalise adopted the role of a concerned sailor; this assumed stance enabled her to express her sense of injustice and voice her worries about returning safely home. As Kramsch (1999, p.57) observes, a stance is a means by which a learner can 'express a way of seeing', an opportunity to synthesise views and feelings and share them publicly. In his writing Nathan too makes his stance and communicative intent clear, voicing a genuine and urgent desire to help the whale. His teacher noted his anxious demeanour and worried frown as he wrote, which like his words reflect the tenor of his feelings. The perceived significance of his writing was indicated when he mimed placing it in a bottle and throwing it out to sea. Barrs and Cork (2001) suggest that writing in-role may be accessible to children because it is close to speech, but it may also appear accessible because of its relevance to the immediate imagined context. Booth observes that writing whilst in-role, in the voice of another, enables children to 'enter a new sphere of attitudes and feelings' as they seek to gain an understanding of what is happening in the drama (1996:123). Another example of this process of encountering alternative views reads:

Dear Sam,

We have no time to help the whale. We must hunt for food and stick together or we will all die. Forget the whale, he is not as important as your life. Listen to my words.

From The Captain

Louise

Louise, also aged six, and an average writer, chose to take the role of the captain and replied to the character Sam as if she had received a beseeching letter from him. In this writing she exerted considerable volition, choosing her perspective, audience and

purpose. In the 'no penalty zone' of drama (Heathcote, 1980) Louise evidently felt comfortable to explore a different viewpoint voiced earlier by her teacher in the whole class improvisation. The finality of her letter suggests that as captain she has taken control, she makes it clear she expects conformity and outlines and justifies her outlook. Wagner argues that writing in role provides children with a more authentic voice than when they write as themselves, since they often perceive themselves as 'relatively powerless or insignificant' (1998, p.122). Through adopting different viewpoints and examining new and more powerful positions in both drama and writing, these young learners experienced alternative ways of being and knowing. In the process they appeared to find an alignment, akin to a foothold in the text, from which they could negotiate meaning more readily. Young children's writing, as Dyson (1998) observes, often includes unexpected shifts in tense and authorial stance, but the opportunity to voice self-chosen perspectives in drama appeared to reduce this tendency, prompting a more assured use of first person narration and accurate use of tense. Their teacher also noted that in such writing they were able to show empathy, maintain their chosen stance and include important details relating to the needs of their intended readers. The data indicates that the imposition of a particular writing stance may not be appropriate in drama, but that when children write in-role from a chosen perspective this can help them focus their writing and enable them to make good use of details to describe the setting, characters or imagined events.

Drawing conclusions

This small scale research project suggests that drama has much to contribute to the composing life of the primary classroom. Through the process of collaborative inquiry, the main features of drama which influenced the children's engagement and facilitated the production of effective writing were identified. These included the presence of tension, the degree of engagement, time for incubation and a strong sense of stance and purpose gained in part through role adoption. When all these connecting threads were evident in a drama and a moment for writing was seized, the case study children's writing was recognised to be consistently high in quality. The children's concentration and ability to focus and follow through their written work was also positively affected by their involvement in process drama.

During their engagement in tense dramatic encounters the children in this research project were brought to the brink of writing and on these occasions their writing seemed to flow from the imagined context with relative ease. It appeared that the drama helped them build belief and deepen their involvement in the narrative and that as part of the process of creating and inhabiting fictional worlds, the children enriched their own voices with the stances, registers, words and actions of others. Their resultant written work was frequently full of 'stance and scenario' Bruner (1984, p.198), reflecting real engagement in the issues and considerable attention to detail. Writing in role from a particular stance which had been developed through drama appeared to strengthen their writing, since the convictions that the children developed and expressed in the drama were often retained in their writing, enabling the writer's point of view to be expressed clearly and with a degree of emphasis. In addition to prompting potent thoughts and feelings, attitudes and information which were harnessed in writing, the drama also provided audience and purpose for their written communications. It would appear that the ideational and the interpersonal support offered by the drama eased the burden of writing, motivated the young writers and

facilitated the production of high quality writing. In addition, the children showed an unusual degree of dedication and commitment to the writing they composed in drama and many chose to return to it in journal time. Neelands *et al.* (1993) observe, that when 'writing is embedded in a context that has personal significance for the writer, the motivation for writing changes drastically' (p.10). This research also suggests that if the context is powerful enough, writers may choose to revisit it, seeking perhaps to recapture the sense of tension or affective involvement felt or to explore the stances voiced and that this process enables young writers to percolate, reshape and refine both their thinking and writing still further.

In employing the 'seize the moment' approach to drama and writing, the project teachers tried to remain open to possibilities, to the unknown and the unexpected, gradually they also encouraged the children to initiate and suggest moments in which purposeful writing could be undertaken. Their experience of the pilot study convinced these teacher-researchers that the 'genre-specific' approach limited both their own involvement as artists and the children's full engagement as writers. So they sought to create more permeable artistic and aesthetic drama and writing opportunities in the curriculum. In the process they began to blur the boundaries between 'analysis and action, inquiry and experience, theorising and doing' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2005, p. 219) and drew heavily on their growing professional assurance and artistry. Each came to view writing as an integral part of the world making play frame of process drama and drama as a valuable tool for facilitating quality writing.

A number of issues remain unresolved and represent possible themes for further research. The quality of the writing produced appeared to depend, at least in part, on the efficacy and subtle combination of the connecting threads: the tension felt, the strength of the children's engagement, the role perspectives they choose to adopt and the percolation afforded through the imagined experience. This study, in seeking to identify these threads and ascertain their influence on any related writing, did not seek to examine their relative importance or the nature of their interplay; this would seem a significant next step. In addition, the team noted that some of the young people wrote particularly effectively when they adopted more powerful roles in drama, although this was not common across the case study children, the researchers wish to investigate this issue relating it to the young people's authorial agency and self-determination in drama and writing. The relationship between particular drama conventions on writing in the poetic mode (Britton, 1993) represents another possible avenue of enquiry, as does the question of whether the writing enriches the dramatic exploration, transforming the meanings created in the imaginary world and developing a synergy between drama and writing.

Exploring implications

Based on the findings from this study, it is argued that process drama can do much more than create the conditions to motivate and engage young writers. Whether children's ideas are spontaneously generated and recorded, or initially incubated and later revisited, drama offers them real support and has the capacity to foster thoughtful, imaginative and effective writing. In order to offer young writers the supportive scaffold of drama however, teachers need to be able to involve children in the often conflict-driven, open-ended contexts that are typical of process drama and

need to adroitly seize moment/s for writing, allowing the learners considerable choice in terms of perspective, purpose and form in their writing.

This capacity to respond intuitively in imagined contexts and to negotiate possible ways forward, seizing appropriate moment/s for writing represents a significant challenge for less experienced teachers of drama who may find the ambiguity and flexibility required somewhat daunting. The ability to connect drama and writing by 'seizing the moment' to write may be particularly difficult for primary teachers to develop, many of whom have become accustomed to the structures and strictures of the NLS (DfEE, 1998) and its tight pedagogical framing of writing instruction. The NLS initially ignored drama and arguably sidelined the spoken word, focusing teachers' attention on a limited range of reading and writing skills. As a result, the confidence and creativity of teachers has been reduced (Frater, 2000; Grainger *et al.*, 2005; Sedgwick, 2001) and their professional autonomy has been threatened (Burgess *et al.*, 2001). Providing opportunities to write during drama demands that teachers create a more effective balance between knowledge about language and creative language use and are able to adopt a flexible responsive approach to developing young writers.

The challenge of linking drama and writing is further compounded by the primary profession's reticence to embrace the potential of drama, either in literacy or as a subject in its own right. There are indications that teachers and student teachers are somewhat wary of this medium, with its connotations of theatre and performance (Wright, 1999). To adopt drama fully as an art form, a tool for learning and a support for developing writing, teachers and student teachers are likely to need considerable support; developing both subject knowledge and the confidence gained from reflective experience to trust their intuitive judgement and seize potent moments to write. The complexity of combining drama and writing and remaining sensitive to the tension being experienced, the learners' affective engagement and the role perspectives adopted should not be underestimated. The teachers in this research worked to explore this complex artistry with their colleagues in school and facilitated in-house professional development sessions in which they engaged staff in drama and writing themselves and demonstrated the intuition and artistry involved. Opportunities to team teach have also been seized and a video and resources created to illuminate links between drama and literacy learning (Teachers TV, 2006).

Another implication of this study is that improvisation, which is central to process drama, deserves to be much more fully recognised as an integral aspect of the act of written composition at the primary phase. Improvisation is focused on the divergence of ideas through play: physical, verbal and mental play with ideas and possibilities. It represents a rich and supportive resource for young writers. The time taken to generate, explore and share options through dramatic improvisation appears to expand the flow of ideas available and thus supports the development of children's ideational fluency, helping them make unusual associations and connections and select particularly evocative language as they compose. While improvising in drama, children are involved in thinking, feeling, visualising and creating multiple possibilities; in their related writing they are often able to make this thinking visible as they shape their understanding further. Based on this work it is proposed that teachers should map in more time for children to create shared fictitious worlds through drama and to reflect upon these in and through their writing. Such

imaginative improvisational engagement can help children create and transform experience, enabling them to generate, cultivate and incubate their own and each others' ideas. In seeking to link drama and writing, teachers should also try to provide opportunities for children to return to work begun in drama and ensure that real choice and agency is offered, avoiding conformity to a single genre, perspective or purpose.

Drama can do much more than motivate young writers; it has the potential to contribute markedly to composition and effect in writing, to create writing which captures the reader's interest and attention, uses powerful language and evokes a strong sense of the writer's stance and voice. Drama also fosters commitment and concentration in writing and prompts children to revisit their writing to shape it further. Teachers of writing deserve to become better acquainted with its symbolic and transformative potential so they can support young writers and seize engaging and effective moment/s to write during process drama.

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